

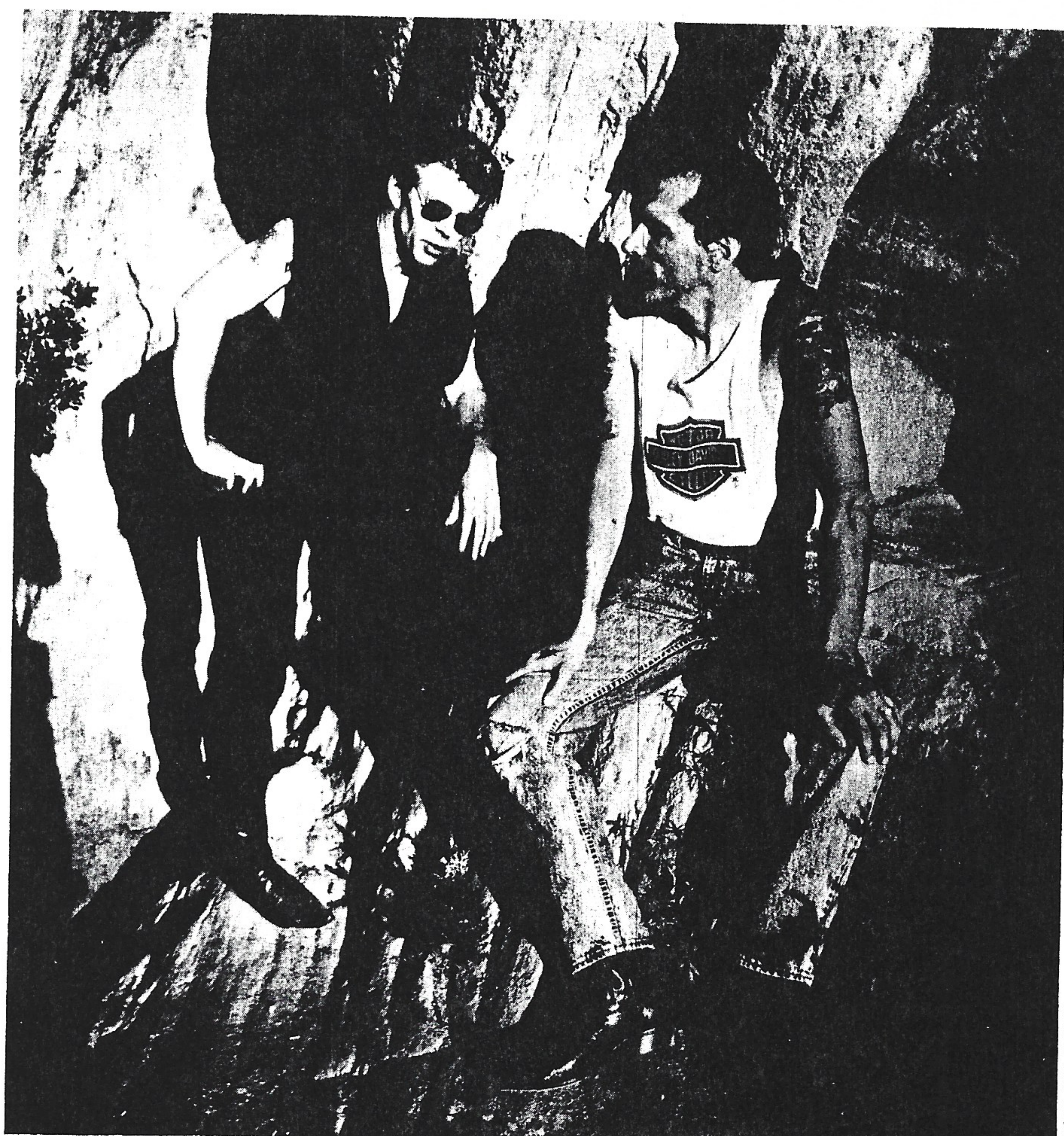
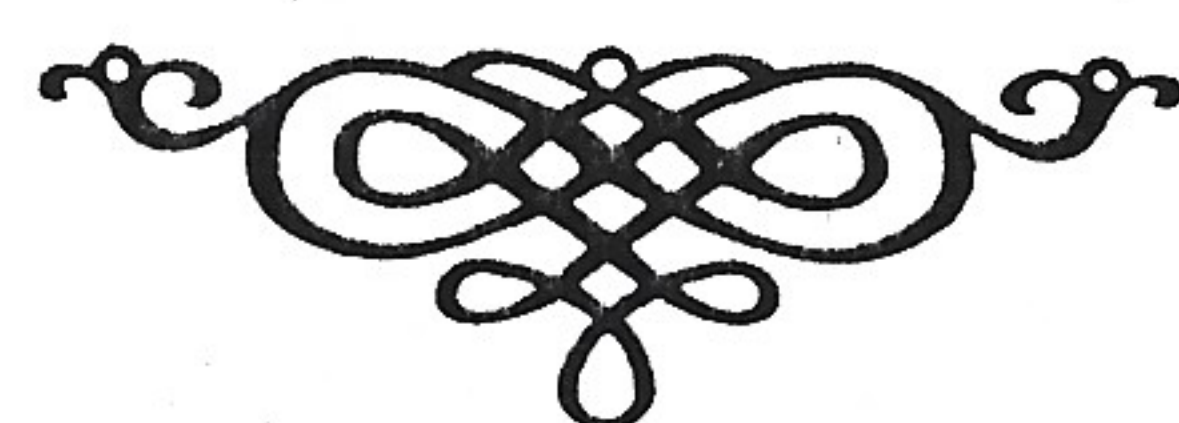


PHOTO: CARL STODNA

HOT TUNA

Electric Slide And Blue



by Danny McCue

In a business where history is made by a 14-week run at the top of the *Billboard* pop charts, the 34-year-old musical partnership, not to mention friendship, of Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady is best described as an anomaly.

As high school musicians and as members of either *The Jefferson Airplane* or *Hot Tuna*, they've made just about every kind of music from psychedelic '60s pop to heavy metal or rural country blues; never because of the demands of formula or fashion, but rather in adherence to a series of musical legacies, along the way repaying debts owed the work of Robert Johnson, Brownie McGhee, Blind Blake and, particularly, the Reverend Gary Davis.

And like characters out of a Kerouac novel, Jorma and Jack have never been far from the road. Today Casady plays a number of different basses, including an acoustic Guild, a 1972 Gibson Les Paul Custom and a Modulus five-string. Kaukonen is currently playing a Modulus he describes as a "Telecaster clone," with EMG pickups and a graphite neck.

Hot Tuna's latest album, after a recording hiatus of several years, is *Pair A Dice Found*. Produced by Jorma Kaukonen, it is a CBS Records release.

THE MUSIC PAPER: Why did you go back to electric guitars after so long as "Acoustic" *Hot Tuna*?

JORMA KAUKONEN: When Jack and I did the thing with *The Airplane* [*The Jefferson Airplane* reunion album and tour] a while back, we discovered that we enjoyed playing "electrically" again, and in the wake of that I wanted to put something together so that we could do "our kind of music" and

do it that way. . . When you're playing acoustic, people always ask, "Why don't you play electric?" And when you play electric, they want to know why you're not playing acoustic. From my point of view, the music is pretty much the same, it's just that the dynamic of the whole thing is a little bit different. It ends up having common threads.

TMP: Is there any level on which you feel limited in playing one way or the other?

KAUKONEN: Electric's more linear, I think.

CASADY: It's like walking into a different room. It's two different places. And in the acoustic set, what you're working with too is the subtleties of the instrument; you're not thinking of how you'd approach something electrically.

TMP: You mentioned earlier that you actually "discovered" that you still like playing electrically. Did it take you a while to get the hang of it again?

KAUKONEN: For me, because I pick so much harder when I play acoustic guitar, I really have to physically adapt to playing the electric, otherwise it just makes the strings rattle. When I fingerpick, let's say on something where you're used to it being hard, like "San Francisco Bay Blues" or some raggy tune like that, it's getting better, but I haven't quite got the fluidity picking lighter and lighter gauge strings. It's getting there, but it's going to take a while.

TMP: How would you appraise your maturation as guitarists?

CASADY: It's true, we have actually gotten better! [Laughs] We've really been enjoying being able to use the various stages of learning we've been through, 'cause don't forget, we were only in our early 20s when we started. . .

KAUKONEN: You were in your early 20s. I was already decrepit.

CASADY: Early in your career you tend to dive into a certain frame of mind, and so if you got a new wah-wah pedal, the wah-wah pedal was on every track of the next album. The same would occur with a new technique you learned. It's usually only after some time has passed that you can draw upon those things and use them creatively and be comfortable with them.

KAUKONEN: Also, the neat thing about the guitar is that there's always something new to be learned; you can't ever rest on your laurels.

TMP: So what influences would you say have come into your playing over the last few years?

KAUKONEN: Oh boy. That's a tough one. Let me think here. That's really tough, but there are a couple of specifics. Like, John Hammond showed me how to do that false harmonics thing, where you hit the string with the pick and the flesh of your finger at the same time. All the heavy metal kids do it these days, but I didn't, and I just played around with it and developed it. Little things like that happen and then it works its way into your style.

CASADY: Just being comfortable with yourself is also bound to influence your style, so to speak. I guess the most gratifying thing that can happen to a musician is to reach that stage where you can listen to what you're playing and actually be able to hear it. It's nice to relax with yourself a little bit.

TMP: Of course the blues influence remains the constant.

KAUKONEN: I guess the Reverend Gary Davis is always there, even though I don't do it [fingerpick] the same way that Stefan Grossman or the Rev. does because I use

three fingers instead of two. But his presence is always there, especially in a lot of the chord formations I play. I use those funny thumb things that he does all the time.

CASADY: Emmet Lowry was one of my guitar playing heroes.

KAUKONEN: There's a name you don't hear too often anymore.

CASADY: He'd hit things and you could tell that the third string wasn't an unwound third, man. This thing was a third string that you could stretch. The same with the Reverend Gary Davis and Robert Johnson; they're not using the ultra-slinkys — and those are good things for young musicians to hear. The same with the actual chord structures used by those guys and, you know, not just in the format of a rhythmic background. That's important.

TMP: Are fan expectations sometimes frustrating to you as players?

CASADY: Well, I was pointing this out just last night, that no matter how many tunes we play — and Jorma and I know a few hundred — somebody is going to ask you to play something you haven't played in a while. It's not out of animosity or anything, but there's always somebody that's going to say, "Well gee, you've just finished your three-hour show, but you didn't play so and so."

KAUKONEN: But now, that can be positive too. Like, somebody will ask for a song I've forgotten about and I'll go back and relearn it. A different kind of frustration — though it's kind of funny, too — is something that happened just the other night: We'd been playing for a while and somebody said, "Play 'Sea Child.'" So we played "Sea Child" and then two songs later I heard somebody screaming, "Play 'Sea Child!'" [Laughs]